

The Elasticity of the Non-Breath in Meanwhile: The Possibilities of a Small Sonic Intervention (A Letter to Kinga Jaczewska)

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This is a reworked version of the first letters to Polish/Belgian choreographer Kinga Jaczewska, which I presented at PSi #25 in Calgary. The letter is a dramaturgical reflection on the possibilities of a small sonic intervention in Jaczewska's performative installation Meanwhile (2019). I explore the possibilities and consequences of a sonic non-breath for the experience of the audience.

Ghent (Belgium), June 25th 2019

Calgary (Canada), July 7th 2019

Brussels (Belgium), September 22nd 2020

Dear Kinga:

I hope you enjoyed your holiday and I am happy to finally write you this dramaturgical letter. I hope it finds you well. In this letter, I want to elaborate on some topics, questions, suggestions and possibilities we touched upon in our previous conversations dealing with

your first full-length choreography *Grey* (2017) and the development of your newest installation *Meanwhile* (2018), although these are two completely different kinds of works: *Grey*, a forty-five-minute choreography for a trio and *Meanwhile*, an installation of floating objects, light, video, and sound.

On your website you describe *Meanwhile* as “an installation for floating sculptures, which is highly sensitive to motion and where time becomes a connecting tissue” (Kinga-Jaczewska.com). In Dutch, the word “meanwhile” (*onder-tussen*) incorporates both a spatial and a temporal indicator. It connotes something that needs to be lifted up or looked under. It stretches and reveals an in-between. Both *Grey* and *Meanwhile* negotiate between stillness and movement and are connected to each other by the element of breath. In my experience, *Grey* reveals our respiration as mere labour.

This revelation functioned as my steppingstone towards the suggestion of breathing as an action which helps to redefine intimacy (Persyn, “I Breathe, You Breathe, We Breathe”). While I was working on this suggestion and the analysis of *Grey*, I sent you the following quote by dance historian and critic Laurence Louppe: “Time within the non-breath becomes a line of tension as fine as it is continuous” (62). I asked you what would happen if you entered *Meanwhile* with the sound of an inhalation and exited with an exhalation. If I now think back on that question and quote, I can only propose that this act of breathing would string a bow of tension and weave an acoustic bubble. If you are willing to follow this proposal, we could imagine that, due to a minimal sonic intervention of one respiratory cycle, the installation becomes a non-breath characterized by suspension. The bubble occurs due to the elasticity of the non-breath; the time in between inhalation and exhalation expands and is characterized by inertia. By encapsulating the audience in an acoustic bubble, you activate and prepare them to “undergo an energetic motion” (Leighton 72).^[1] Due to the procrastination of the exhalation, you offer the audience a chance to oscillate with the energetically loaded inertial field of the installation.

I remember how you were enthusiastic about this proposal of a restricted sonic intervention, but at the same time you stressed how, to you, sound remained a mere addition. And even though I indicated how everything sounds even if we don’t hear it or pay attention to it, your doubts remained. So, let me ask you: What does sound mean to you? What is sound? And when do you think something sounds? In his book *Atmospheric Things* cultural geographer Derek P. McCormack says that *to sound* equals to make something available for sensing (123). In the case of *Meanwhile*, this would mean that through sound you enable the audience to explore the properties and qualities of the installation. The sonic qualities of the inhalation lure the audience into the installation, making the richness of the installation available for sensing. But how does that happen?

The sound of an inhalation recalls an inward movement that makes the body light and focuses the attention (Persyn “To make room for resonance”). It fills the installation with air; it tightens the boundaries of the situation and announces the exhalation, which, in this case, is procrastinated. Consequent to the procrastination of the exhalation, the non-breath becomes suspended and defined as a constant ambiguity between full and empty, between tension and release. In each non-breath, there is a point where the need to

change direction occurs, the moment where the (acoustic) bubble is about to explode. This is the moment where the need for an exhalation or an inhalation peaks. The point of inflection between inhalation and exhalation makes the elasticity of the non-breath tangible. It positions the audience on the edge of the bearable, because the next movement (exhalation) hasn't arrived yet and the past — the inhalation — is passing (Manning 32).^[2] Due to the sonic incorporation of inhalation and exhalation in *Meanwhile*, you would stretch out the available time and space in the non-breath, inviting your audience to stay a little longer than they can bear. Through this invitation, you would try to reveal what is present in the in-between, in the meantime. You invite them to deal with the inertia. In the context of *Meanwhile*, an exhalation at the end of the visit would minimize the space to linger. A sense that all the air was used up would encourage one to step out of the installation.

Based on my own listening experience, I dare say that an acoustic inhalation tends to sharpen the listening. Consequently, an inhalation at the beginning of the non-breath, awakens a micro-perception of the in-between (Manning 36). Due to the air that is inserted into the installation and the space it creates, I start to listen to the small sound of silence. In the context of *Meanwhile*, this experience intensifies as I start to watch how the oscillations of the in-between are visualized by the floating objects. The audible respiratory cycle suggests the possibility that anything can happen, because you simply invite the audience members to search and shape a togetherness with what (already) is present in the in-between (Manning 32). You do not force the meantime upon them, but only open up the opportunity to engage with it.

Once the audience engages, the floating objects direct the attention toward movement, in the in-between. Regardless of how small the movements are, they trigger awareness and stimulate the audience to move. When moving together with the objects, the audience becomes attentive towards the other. This means that those who allow the togetherness will be capable of setting their relation with the objects and each other in motion. Only they will undergo an energetic motion and oscillate. Having said all this, it seems as if your concern with the non-breath in *Meanwhile* is to “reveal people as they are engaged in various kinds of activities alone, with each other, with objects” (Rainer) an in and with time and space.^[3]

You, yourself, have never spoken about a non-breath, but we do speak a lot about breath. In one of our talks on *Meanwhile* you described the breath as continuity and softness (Persyn “Field Notes”). Building further on that statement, I would characterize the non-breath as texture, as a woven and irregular pattern of (possible) microperceptions. A pattern which reveals the simultaneity of a diminuendo and a crescendo. In the words of geographer Paul C. Adams the texture (here the non-breath) “provides a [palpable] glimpse of the processes, structures, spaces and histories that went into its [the texture/non-breath] making” (xiii).^[4] A pattern which never looks and feels twice the same. A pattern which reveals everchanging systems and networks, to which one can tune in. Dramaturge and philosopher Peter Eckersall calls such an awareness of “systems and networks features of the slow” (180).

Bringing it all together one could say that with the sonic incorporation of a breathing movement, *Meanwhile* installs a slow and inefficient everyday prose to the poetical features of the floating objects. It creates the possibility to pay attention to perspectives of flow and interconnectivity (Eckersall 179-181). Or a small sonic intervention in *Meanwhile* enables you to “create smaller kinds of intensities, which require the performers and audience to listen to the context of the work” (Eckersall 186). A bubble is always subject to changes in its surrounding medium. The conditions and matter of the surroundings determine whether a bubble pops, bursts or slowly floats along. The surroundings influence the borders of the elasticity and the tolerability of the inertia.

From our conversations I can distill that the inertia embedded in *Meanwhile*, or the meantime as you often call it, isn't wasted time (Kinga-Jaczewska.com). But why did previous audiences of *Meanwhile* often conceive it like that? Why has it been so difficult for audiences entering *Meanwhile* to allow and engage with the meantime? I think you wrote the answer in one of the texts on your website. In *Project Life* you indicate that “the meantime is the time where you can be a body, without having to be that somebody” (Kinga-Jaczewska.com). Being just a body (in the meantime) is one of the hardest things to do for an audience. It conflicts with our urge to be a somebody, to identify. It doesn't fulfill our need for defined conditions.

The lack of defined conditions in *Meanwhile* produces hesitation. For philosopher Byung-Chul Han it is exactly hesitation that defines the movement at the in-between (37), the movement you have been interested in. If we look to the moving objects/bodies in *Meanwhile*, there is no stuttering or stammering. On the contrary, they are floating, slowly exploring new heights and directions. Following Byung-Chul Han, this would mean that the hesitation defining the movement in *Meanwhile* is continuous but it allows a process of togetherness without demanding progress or results. (Persyn, “Field Notes”) The hesitation and movement in *Meanwhile* reveals the continuous fragility of things in time (Rovelli 165).^[5] The only thing a sonic intervention of a respiratory cycle would do is underline this fragility.

Byung-Chul Han adds that the meantime embedded in this in-between is a “temporal interval that stretches between to conditions or events” (37). With the small sonic intervention of the respiratory cycle, you not only landmark the fragility of things in time and the necessity of hesitation but you also give the audience a suggestion on how to cope with being in-between. The inhalation, while entering *Meanwhile*, suggests something prior to this new beginning. The exhalation, guiding the exit, releases the audience from just being a body and suggests the possibility of (re)becoming a somebody. “Suggestion” descends from the Latin word *suggerere* (to shelter): it is due to the sonic incorporation of a respiratory cycle that you will manage to shelter the audience in the elasticity of the non-breath and make them feel at home in the hesitation embedded in this fragile in-between. Due to the acoustic bubble, *Meanwhile* becomes a lived space, which envelops and encourages the imaginative and representational potential of the audience (Groot Nibbelink 26).^[6]

With this argument, I hope I could convince you that sound isn't a mere addition to *Meanwhile* but crucial to encourage the audience to stay a while and be a hesitating body among and in togetherness with other bodies.

Warm regards and a lot of love,

Leonie

P.S.₁: How is your urge for a solo and coca-cola red?

P.S.₂: I hope you get back to me, soon.

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Endnotes

1. In his book *The Acoustic Bubble*, physical scientist T.G. Leighton describes different possible interactions of sound (including all vibrations on the spectrum of the acoustic field) and (gas) bubbles in liquid. In this section, he explores the mechanisms of *cavitation inception* or, in layman terms, the creation of a new surface or cavity within a liquid by expanding that which already exists in the liquid. In his description, I found a parallel and maybe even a metaphor for what would happen when one adds the sound of respiratory cycle to *Meanwhile*, because the sound of an inhalation and exhalation creates a new cavity within the performance space and activates the audience within it. The bow of tension (the acoustic surface) enveloping this space (or acoustic bubble) is created by the expansion of the already existing (although often unnoticed) sound and movement of the breath. It expands the bodily surface of the audience member. ↑.
2. In chapter 2, *The Elasticity of the Almost*, in her book *Relationscapes*, Canadian philosopher Erin Manning underlines the relational intervals and the intensity, which define the movements of bodies in relation to each other or to external bodies/organs. For Manning, intensity relieves movement and the body from all too rigid patterns of displacement in space. The point of the bearable I describe here is what Manning would call "an elastic point" (Manning 38) being "experience in relational movement" (Manning 38) to the objects floating in space. The elastic point (the point of the unbearable) equals, for Manning, "an actualized event in the dance, as well as an opening to a virtual suspension" (Manning 38). At the point of elasticity, the almost flourishes and movement stretches out. When bearing the unbearable, one is able to discover the almost and its invitation to linger. ↑.
3. Kinga Jaczewska loves the body. Her love for the body always shines through in her work and in our talks. In the context of *Meanwhile* the way she talked about the body and what she tried to do reminded me of *The mind is the muscle*, a statement by American dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer. In this statement, Rainer precisely describes her fascination for and interest in the body. The baseline of this text highly resonates with Kinga's approach to the body in the context of *Meanwhile*. ↑.

4. Geographer Paul C. Adams explores humanist geographies in his book *Textures of Place*. For him, texture indicates the place where object and subject mingle, where they interact. Through the texture, one can at least experience the complexity of a place. ↑.
5. “I feel the fragility of things in time” is a sentence from one of the nine Strauss-Hofmannsthal operas, which physicist Carlo Rovelli quotes in his book *The Order of Time* in order to clarify our relationship with time. The fragility of time is a poetic phrase that pinpoints time as “the fleeting structure of the world” (Rovelli 65) and stresses its ephemerality instead of its structuring capacities. The fragility of time contains what Rovelli calls our “longing for timelessness” (Rovelli 65). ↑.
6. Throughout her book *Nomadic Theatre*, theatre and media scholar Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink describes several times how in contemporary performances the performance space (often public space) characterizes what Henry Lefebvre circumscribed as lived space. Due to its imaginative and representational potential, the performance space in *Meanwhile* also becomes a space where we reveal, discover, suggest, and experience (possible) social relations in everyday life. ↑.